DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 913 IR 050 798

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TITLE Patron Presence during the Online Search: Attitudes of University Librarians.
PUB DATE Jun 84
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Library Association (Dallas, TX, June 23-27, 1984). Contains small print.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Libraries; Higher Education; *Information Retrieval; *Librarians; Library Research; Library Surveys; *Online Systems
IDENTIFIERS *Computer Searches; *Librarian Attitudes; Library Users; Likert Scales; Online Search Skills; Search Behavior

ABSTRACT

A controversial issue involving online computer searching is the effect of patron presence during the computer search. The purpose of this research was to determine the attitudes of university librarians toward patron presence. A survey was used to explore variables related to the search process and searcher characteristics. Also considered was the degree to which a searcher believes that patron presence contributes to searcher nervousness. Three-hundred eighty online searchers, representing 85 libraries, were willing to participate. Of the 201 surveys (52.9%) returned, 198 were usable. Eleven Likert scale items were used to estimate attitudes along a five-point continuum of "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The relationship of searcher experience and the attitudes reflected in the Likert scale items were measured by four additional variables. Overall, 77% of the searchers indicated a preference for patron presence during the computer search. Empirical research is necessary in order to understand how the variables of presence, nervousness, and ability to refine the search are related. The conclusions about searcher attitudes and beliefs about the search process resulting from this study can provide direction to research that focuses on the actual search process, and the dynamics of the searcher-patron relationship. (DMC)

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ED246913

Patron Presence during the Online Search: Attitudes of University Librarians

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Presented at the American Library Association annual conference, Dallas, 1984. (Submitted for publication).

Major Purpose

A controversial issue involving online computer searching is the effect of patron presence during the computer search. It may be beneficial for the searcher to have the patron present for a variety of reasons. However, there are also arguments suggesting that patron presence could be a disadvantage, and the patron may be discouraged from being present.

The purpose of the present research was to determine the attitudes of university librarians toward patron presence. A survey was utilized to explore variables related to the search process and searcher characteristics. We are also interested in exploring the degree to which a searcher believes that patron presence contributes to searcher nervousness.

This type of information should allow us to suggest variables that would be productive to evaluate in the searcher-patron relationship using an experimental design in future research.

Method

Three-hundred eighty online searchers, representing 85 libraries were willing to participate. Two hundred and one surveys (52.9%) were returned, and 198 of those were usable.

Eleven Likert scale items were used to estimate attitudes along a five point continuum of "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree" (Table 1). The Likert scales were intended to give a measure of three areas related to the online search. The variables REFINE, TIME, SPELL, CLERRORS, and EXPENSE should provide some idea of attitudes related to the search process. NERVOUS and BOTHER were used to provide information about the effect of patron presence during the search process. PLEASED, QUALITY, and SATISFAC were used to measure searcher attitudes relating patron presence and the search outcome.

The relationship of searcher experience and the attitudes reflected in the Likert scale items were measured by four additional variables:

1. NUMWEEK - number of searches they perform in an average week,
2. YRSEARCH - years they had been searching,
3. AGE - age of respondent,
4. GENDER - gender of respondent.

Results

Overall, 77% of the searchers indicated a preference for patron presence during the computer search (Table II). Multiple stepwise regression was used in the analysis of PRESENT as the dependent variable. Two factors accounted for 72% of the variance of PRESENT:

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TABLE I

ABBREVIATED LIKERT SCALE STATEMENTS

VARIABLE	
PRESENT	I prefer that the patron be present while the search is being run.
NERVOUS	I get nervous when the patron is present during the search.
SPELL	I make more spelling errors when the patron is present during the search.
QUALITY	Patron presence is related to search quality.
SATISFAC	Patron presence is related to search satisfaction.
REFINE	I am better able to refine the search to include what the person wants if the patron is present.
TIME	My time schedule does not permit me to have the patron present during the search.
EXPENSE	Patron presence contributes to additional expense due to too much time online.
BOTHER	The patron bothers me during a search more than being helpful to the process.
CLERRORS	I make more command language errors when the patron is present.
PLEASED	I almost always feel my patrons are pleased with their search results.

TABLE II

Frequency Distribution for the Variable PRESENT

Variable: PRESENT - "I prefer that the search patron be present while the search is being run."

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
50.5%	27.3%	11.1%	9.6%	1.0%

Percentage of responses reflecting general agreement with the notion that the search patron is preferred to be present. Note: Percentages do not total 100 due to missing data.

TABLE III

Factors affecting searchers' preference for patron presence

Step	Factor Added	R^2 change	F	F change
1	REFINE	0.65	322.4	322.4
2	TIME	0.07	226.2	46.7

Note: REFINE and TIME were significant at $p < .001$.

NERVOUS, SATISFAC, and BOTHER were significant at $p < .05$, but contributed less than 0.02 additional variance each.

REFINE - the searcher's belief that the search can be refined if the patron is present, and TIME - the searcher's time schedule allowing for patron presence (Table III).

T-tests showed that searchers preferring patron presence (AGREEers) differed from searchers not preferring patron presence (NONAGREEers; see Table IV). AGREEers strongly agreed that they were better able to refine the search because of patron presence ($\bar{X}$ = 1.31), while NONAGREEers were neutral about refining the search ($\bar{X}$ = 2.84). AGREEers also felt that their time schedules permitted them to have the patron present ($\bar{X}$ = 4.39) while NONAGREEers did not feel that way ($\bar{X}$ = 2.26). However, a number of the variables were moderately correlated and may still be of interest to investigators using a different research design.

Only 16.6% of the participants admitted to being nervous at the terminal while the patron was present. Three variables accounted for 53% of the variance in the respondent's self-reported nervousness (see Table V). The most influential component of searcher nervousness was the concern about making spelling erors while the patron was present (SPELL). Two other variables accounted for 9% of the variance: YRSEARCH - representing the relationship between decreasing searcher nervusness and added years of searcher experience, and PRESENT - representing the inverse relationship between searcher nervousness and preference for patron presence.

Conclusion

In summary, REFINE and TIME have been shown to represent salient attitudes related to patron presence. The most influential relationship was the searcher's ability to refine the search if the patron is present. Also, searchers indicated that if time were available, they would prefer to have the patron present. In addition, concern about spelling errors was strongly related to searcher nervousness. The number of years of searcher experience was inversely related to searcher nervousness. Searchers admitting to nervousness during the search are less inclined to prefer that the patron be present than searchers not reporting nervousness.

It is important to stress that articles representing opinions about patron presence are not sufficient to understand the relationship between patron and searcher. Empirical research is necessary in order to understand how the variables of presence, nervousness, and ability to refine the search are related. Recent research has shown that a person's belief structure and attitudes can be predictive of intention and behavior (see Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Conclusions of the present study summarize relationships that represent searcher attitudes and beliefs about the search process. These conclusions can provide direction to research that can now focus on the actual search process and the dynamics of the searcher-patron relationship. Only when this research has been completed will we better understand how to achieve the best results from a computer search.

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TABLE IV

T-Tests between patron presence

AGREEers[1] and NONAGREEers[2]

for all Likert items

	AGREEers			NONAGREEers			
	n	$\bar{X}$	SE	n	$\bar{X}$	SE	t
NERVOUS	154	3.90	.087	43	3.02	.174	4.65*
SPELL	154	3.72	.086	43	2.98	.158	4.08*
QUALITY	153	1.67	.062	43	3.12	.116	-10.81*
SATISFACTION	153	1.65	.058	42	3.10	.122	-11.40*
REFINE	153	1.31	.037	43	2.86	.124	-11.79*
TIME	154	4.39	.061	43	2.26	.138	15.59*
EXPENSE	154	3.61	.085	43	2.19	.134	8.09*
BOTHER	152	4.28	.063	43	3.00	.152	7.78*
CLERRORS	154	3.87	.080	43	3.07	.139	4.75*
PLEASED	153	1.92	.048	43	2.19	.112	-2.50**

[1]Respondents who agreed or strongly agreed to patron presence item

[2]Respondents who disagreed, strongly disagreed or were neutral to patron presence item.

* significant at $p < .001$

** significant at $p < .013$

FREQUENCIES AND PERCENTAGES OF LIKERT ITEMS

Variable	Likert Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
PRESENT	I prefer that the patron be present.	100 (51%)	54 (27%)	22 (11%)	19 (10%)	2 (1%)	197
NERVOUS	I get nervous when the patron is present.	5 (3%)	28 (14%)	53 (27%)	45 (23%)	67 (34%)	198
SPELL	I make more spelling errors with the patron present.	3 (2%)	38 (19%)	49 (25%)	61 (31%)	47 (24%)	198
QUALITY	Patron presence is related to search quality	72 (37%)	75 (38%)	29 (15%)	20 (10%)	1 (1%)	197
SATISFAC	Patron presence is related to patron satisfaction	74 (38%)	71 (36%)	34 (17%)	17 (9%)	0 -	196
REFINE	I am better able to refine the search with the patron present.	107 (54%)	62 (31%)	17 (9%)	10 (5%)	1 (1%)	197
TIME	My time schedule does not permit me to have the patron present.	7 (4%)	30 (15%)	14 (7%)	67 (34%)	80 (40%)	198
EXPENSE	Patron presence contributes to more expense.	12 (6%)	46 (23%)	46 (23%)	60 (30%)	34 (17%)	198
BOTHER	The patron bothers me during the search.	5 (3%)	10 (5%)	34 (17%)	78 (39%)	69 (35%)	196
CLERRORS	I make more command language errors with the patron presence.	3 (2%)	24 (12%)	53 (27%)	68 (34%)	50 (25%)	198
PLEASED	I almost always feel my patrons are pleased with the search results.	37 (19%)	133 (67%)	22 (11%)	5 (3%)	0 -	197

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TABLE V

Factors affecting searchers' self-reported nervousness

Step	Factor Added	R^2 change	F	F change
1	SPELL	0.44	137.78	137.73
2	YRSEARCH	0.05	84.26	17.73
3	PRESENT	0.04	64.39	13.06

Note: Factors are significant at $p < .001$.